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ABSTRACT

The Mercer University field-based program in elementary education provides practical experience beginning in the junior year. The prospective teacher starts with observations in public school classrooms while enrolled in a foundations of education course. Opportunities to work directly with children commence in the second quarter of the junior year. Participants take mini-teaching assignments concurrently with college classwork on children's literature, art, music, physical education, science, and mathematics. Prior to their final year's field experience, seniors attend an intensive two-week, on-campus workshop dealing with professional ethics, dress, writing lesson plans, and coping with the culture shock that may come in facing classes of children with different cultural backgrounds. During their senior year, students work with two different grade levels in two distinct school populations prior to their actual student teaching. By this point, the seniors are mostly confident of their ability to function successfully in a classroom and move into full-time teaching, with the supervising teacher present only for evaluation or to aid with special activities. A follow-up study of graduates of the program revealed great satisfaction in the way in which the program prepared them for teaching. (JD)

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A SUCCESSFUL FIELD-BASED PROGRAM AT MERCER UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

A SUCCESSFUL FIELD-BASED PROGRAM AT MERCER UNIVERSITY

by Patricia P. Peek

Over the past ten years the Education Department of Mercer University has evolved a successful field-based program for pre-service teachers. A recent graduate survey confirms the effectiveness of early field experiences in preparing prospective teachers with confidence in their ability to work in multi-cultural settings.

Early field experiences for prospective teachers are now de rigueur in teacher training programs. Although these experiences vary in intensity and degree from institution to institution, they have become an integral part of the total preparation for most pre-service teachers. As with other highly touted educational practices, this teacher training technique is now under fire, with some experts questioning the value of early field experiences.

In a paper entitled, "Early Field Experiences: Recurring Dilemmas," Jane Applegate expresses her concern by stating, "We do not yet know what early experiences will or will not do for teacher development," and specifically, "How will we know if the experience, in fact, contributes to the development of teacher confidence?"

While this article cannot provide answers to all questions concerning early field experiences, perhaps the program described will suggest one approach to developing teacher confidence.

A field-based program in elementary education that requires early field experiences, developed by the Education Department of Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, has been in operation since 1974. The impetus for moving into such a program came from an inner-city school's report that a recent Mercer graduate in elementary education had quit her position after only three weeks on the job. She was unable to cope with a classroom atmosphere totally alien to her

limited practice teaching experience, which had been in a traditional, middle-class elementary school. Recognizing the need this report brought to light, the faculty of Mercer University's Education Department felt it imperative to change to a program in teacher education designed to help graduates function successfully in a society which is by no means homogeneous.

Beginning in September of 1974, students in elementary education at Mercer were given the option of selecting a traditional program, which required only one nine-week quarter of full-time student teaching, or a field-based program, which would require three quarters of experience in elementary classrooms. Seven students elected to participate in the field-based pilot program providing more than 250 clock hours in elementary classrooms with multi-cultural populations prior to the traditional student teaching quarter. Classes and seminars were designed and scheduled to provide students an opportunity to apply concepts and theories from academic courses in actual school settings. These courses in the field-based program differed from the usual "ivory tower" type in placing much emphasis on experimentation with various theories, as well as observing and working directly with children to ascertain learning styles and develop appropriate methods. Professors in these courses encouraged students to discover their personal teaching styles and to explore values and attitudes.

One of the initial participants in the program went on to obtain a Ph.D. and is now a director of instruction in elementary education. He writes, "At the end of the year, we initially thought that we

missed some of the academic work; however, we now believe that what we gained was much more valuable. More than content alone or methods alone was taught. Attitudes toward teaching were modeled. The professors instilled a sense of responsibility or a 'consciousness' into their students. The professors modeled what I consider the hardest thing to teach--atttitudes."

The Mercer field-based program in elementary education has been functioning for nearly ten years. Although many changes have been made during this time, the basic premise remains the same: putting theory into practice in multi-cultural settings.

The current field-based program provides for practical experience beginning in the junior year. The future teacher starts with observations in public school classrooms, while he/she is enrolled in a foundations of education course. Opportunities to work directly with children commence in the second quarter of the junior year. Participants undertake mini-teaching assignments concurrently with college classwork in children's literature, art, music, physical education, science and mathematics. They work on creative methods of integrating and presenting subject matter in these content areas.

Prior to their final year's field experiences, seniors attend an intensive two-week, on-campus workshop dealing with such topics as professional ethics, dress, writing lesson plans, and coping with culture shock.

During their senior year, our prospective teachers work with two different grade levels in two distinct school populations prior

to their actual student teaching. Emphasis is placed on teaching reading and the related language arts, teaching social studies, techniques of classroom management, and developing daily and unit lesson plans. Field experiences increase from approximately 64 clock hours with small groups of children during the first quarter, to approximately 160 hours of working with larger groups during the second quarter. This leads into the full-time student teaching experience. By this point, the seniors are mostly confident of their ability to function successfully in their classrooms. Little time is wasted as they move into full-time teaching, with the supervising teacher present only for evaluation or to aid with special activities.

To assess the value of early field experiences and the effectiveness of our field-based program, the Coordinator of the Field-based Program developed a questionnaire for graduates who had been enrolled in the program between 1975 and 1983. The survey attempted to establish whether these graduates felt adequately prepared to teach in their areas of certification and in multi-cultural settings, as well as how they rated their preparation compared with that of their fellow teachers. Of those returning the questionnaire (52%), 74% are currently teaching full-time or substituting. A high percentage (97%) responded that they felt adequately prepared in their area of certification, while 90% felt adequately prepared for teaching in multi-cultural settings. 83% said they were either significantly better prepared or generally better prepared for teaching than were other teachers in their

schools. None responded that they were not as well prepared. Many (71%) reported no difficulty in acquiring a teaching position.

We attempted also to ascertain the value of specific college courses. (See Table I.) While some courses were rated as somewhat or very unsatisfactory in terms of their value to our graduates' present teaching positions, all the field experiences received a 90% or higher satisfactory or very satisfactory rating--with the exception of the September experience (observing in a hometown school prior to the senior year), which is an optional activity. (See Table II.)

We also felt it important to obtain the opinions of some of the supervising teachers who have worked with our students in elementary classrooms. A supplemental survey sent to supervising teachers at two recent field sites had a 52% return rate. (See Table III.) Most of the supervising teachers (93%) responded that their own students' learning increased when field-based students were working in their rooms. All the supervising teachers (100%) indicated that they felt comfortable with their assistant teachers and with the college supervisors in their classrooms. They commented favorably on the integration of field experiences with college courses within the elementary school setting:

"...field-based students can obtain a more complete scope of teaching joys, duties and obligations."

"My association with the university faculty and student teachers has been rewarding. My students especially enjoy the student teachers and their extra help and encouragement."

"I strongly feel that Mercer students are adequately prepared for teaching in grades K-4, middle grades and in multi-cultural

settings as a result of the many first-hand experiences provided them through the field-based program."

An unexpected bonus from the graduates' survey was the consistency of written-in comments emphasizing their confidence in their ability to teach, as well as positive self-concepts based on coping with the realities of teaching.

"This program served as my 'first year' ...I never suffered the problems and anxieties faced by most first year teachers."

"I was able to hammer out a lot of mistakes as a field-based student that I didn't repeat in my transition to my own class and school."

"I feel that being placed in schools beginning the junior year exposed me to enough situations with children to feel confident that my career choice was right for me."

"The knowledge I gained from the various experiences has been beneficial to every aspect of my life. They [field experiences] taught me to organize, communicate, listen, create and observe. They helped prepare me for life. Thanks."

These comments lend support to our original goal: to help graduates function successfully in a homogeneous society. The Mercer graduate who wrote, "I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing than [teaching]," epitomizes the self-actualized teacher secure with a career choice and confident in her professional expertise.

END

Reference:

Applegate, Jane. Early field experiences: recurring dilemmas. Unpublished paper delivered at the Association of Teacher Educators Annual Meeting, New Orleans, 1984.

Tables:

I. Percentage of Graduate Respondents Reporting Value of College Courses
II. Percentage of Graduate Respondents Reporting Value of Field Experience
III. Percentage of Supervising Teachers Reporting Value of Field Experiences for Pre-service Teachers

PERCENTAGE OF GRADUATE RESPONDENTS REPORTING VALUE OF COLLEGE COURSES

COURSE	VERY SATISFACTORY	SATISFACTORY	SOMEWHAT UNSATISFACTORY	VERY UNSATISFACTORY
Foundations of Education	20	59	18	3
Human Growth & Development	40.5	48	6.5	5
Physical Education for Elem.	26	56	19	0
Children's Literature	75	22	3	0
Child & Family	47.5	49.5	4	0
Math for Elementary	24	53	12	11
Music for Elementary	15	55	25	5
Art for Elementary	25	48	17	10
Chemistry for Elementary	12	40	27	22
Reading for Elementary	65	29	4.5	1.5
Language Arts	68	19	1.5	1.5
Educational Psychology	29	50	18	2
Curriculum	27	62	11	0
Social Science	15	52	18	16
Exceptional Children	34	48	13	5
Methods & Media	25	46	19	10

TABLE I

PERCENTAGE OF GRADUATE RESPONDENTS REPORTING VALUE OF FIELD EXPERIENCE

EXPERIENCE	VERY SATISFACTORY	SATISFACTORY	SOMEWHAT UNSATISFACTORY	UN-SATISFACTORY
September Experience (optional)	41	46	5.5	7.5
Observations in Public Schools	54	43	3	0
Tutoring Individual Children	42	54	3	0
Working with Small Groups	52	45	3	0
Working with Large Groups	58	39	3	0
Working with Different Grade Levels	67	30	1.5	1.5
Working with Supervising Teachers	62	34	4	0
Working with College Supervisors	65	33	2	0
Working in Multi-cultural Sites	54	36	6	4
Lesson Planning	63	31	4	1
Unit Planning	62	34	4	0
Learning Centers	58	34	7	0
Bulletin Boards	49	43	7	1
Creative Dramatics	40	50	10	0

TABLE II

PERCENTAGE OF SUPERVISING TEACHERS REPORTING VALUE OF FIELD-EXPERIENCES FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

EXPERIENCE	VERY BENEFICIAL	BENEFICIAL	SOMEWHAT BENEFICIAL	NOT BENEFICIAL
Observation	46.5	46.5	7	0
Tutoring Individual Children	37.5	50	12.5	0
Working with Small Groups	50	44	6	0
Working with Large Groups	69	25	6	0
Full-time Student Teaching	81	19	0	0
Working in Multi-cultural Sites	62.5	37.5	0	0
Lesson Planning	94	6	0	0
Unit Planning	75	25	0	0
Learning Centers	33	40	27	0
Book Nooks	25	62.5	12.5	0
Bulletin Boards	33	60	7	0
Experimenting with various methods	60	40	0	0
Parent Conferences	6.5	40	47	65
Attending Faculty Meetings	6.5	20	53	7
Extracurricular Activities	20	27	53	0
Trial Run - TPAI* * (Georgia Teacher Performance Assessment Instrument)	53	47	0	0

TABLE III